

Overview

Before I worked on Vietnam in the Pentagon and Saigon, and before I released the Pentagon Papers, I worked at the highest levels of the U.S. national security system on completely different issues: command and control of nuclear weapons, plans for general nuclear war, and preventing (or if necessary, managing) nuclear Armageddon between the superpowers.

In 1961 I drafted the top secret guidance from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the operational plans for general nuclear war. The following year I was the only person to serve on two of the three working groups reporting to the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOM) during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

A year later, just before I joined the Defense Department full-time at the highest super-grade level, I was sole researcher in an interagency classified study of past US nuclear crises—including Cuba, Berlin, Offshore Islands (Quemoy), Lebanon, Suez (in which I had participated as a Marine officer with the Sixth Fleet)-- with classified access several levels above top secret.

Doomsday Machine, will include that earlier personal experience and continued research up to the present..It will be the first book ever to expose from an insider's perspective the

potentially-disastrous risk-taking of U.S. nuclear policy and posture, and the secrecy system that hides these dangers from public scrutiny.

One day in the spring of 1961, soon after my 30th birthday, I was shown how our world would end. Not the Earth, not—so far as I knew then—all humanity or life, but the destruction of most cities and people in the Northern Hemisphere.

What I was handed in a White House office was a single sheet of paper with some numbers and lines on it. It was headed “Top Secret”; under that, “Joint Chiefs of Staff” and “For the President’s Eyes Only.” The deputy assistant to the president for national security, Robert Komer, showed it to me. A cover sheet identified it as the answer to a question President John F. Kennedy had addressed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff a week earlier.

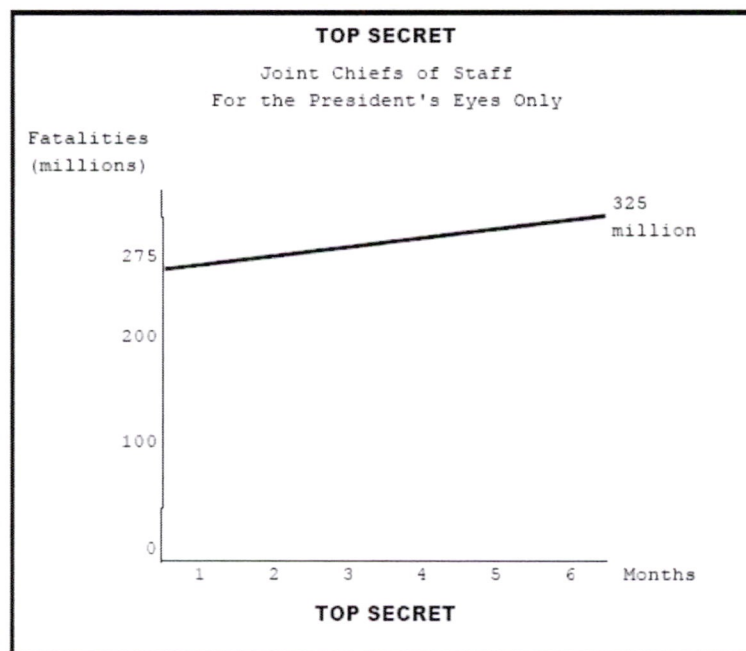
The “Eyes Only” designation on their reply meant that, in principle, it was to be seen and read only by the person to whom it was explicitly addressed, in this case the president. Komer showed it to me because I had drafted the question, which Komer had sent to the JCS in the president’s name

The question was: “If your current plans for general nuclear war are carried out as planned, how many people will be killed in the Soviet Union and China?”

Their answer, a few days later, was in the form of a graph (see representation

below). The vertical axis was the number of deaths, in millions. The horizontal axis was time, indicated in months. The graph was a straight line, starting at time zero—on the vertical axis, the immediate deaths expected within hours of our attack—slanting upward to a maximum at six months, an arbitrary cutoff for the deaths that would accumulate over time from initial injuries and from fallout radiation.

The lowest number, at the left of the graph, was 275 million deaths. The number at the right-hand side, at six months, was 325 million.



That same morning, with Komer's approval, I drafted another question to be sent to the Joint Chiefs over the president's signature, asking for a total breakdown of global deaths from our own attacks, to include not only the whole Sino-Soviet bloc, but all other countries that would be affected by fallout. Again their answer was prompt. Komer showed it to me about a week later, this time in the form of a table with explanatory footnotes.

In sum, 100 million more deaths were predicted in East Europe. There might be an additional 100 million from fallout in West Europe, depending on which way the wind blew (a matter, largely, of the season). And still another 100 million deaths were predicted from fallout in the mostly neutral countries adjacent to the Soviet bloc or China: Finland, Austria, Afghanistan, India, Japan, and others, even though no U.S. warheads would explode inside their territory. Finland, for example, would be wiped out by fallout from U.S. ground-burst explosions on the Soviet submarine pens at Leningrad. The report did not include an estimate of non-fatal injuries, nor did it include casualties from any Soviet retaliatory attacks.

The total death toll as calculated by the Joint Chiefs, from a U.S. first strike aimed at the Soviet Bloc and China, would be roughly 600 million dead. A hundred Holocausts.

As it happened, I had drafted the question about these estimated deaths in the belief that the JCS did not know an answer to it. Officers I worked with in the planning staff of the Air Force were convinced that no one in national defense had ever calculated the overall human

consequences of carrying out their plans. That encouraged me to ask the JCS for an estimate, in the expectation they would be forced to admit, to their embarrassment, that they could not answer it promptly.

Alternatively, I expected the Joint Staff to improvise an estimate which could easily be exposed as unrealistically low. The point of embarrassing them one way or the other was to undermine JCS bureaucratic resistance to changing their plans in the direction of new guidance I had drafted for the secretary of defense earlier that month.

But my expectations were wrong. The Joint Chiefs were embarrassed neither by the question nor by their answer. They offered it without hesitation, without apology, without explanation or excuse or offer of resignation. That was the surprise, given the answer itself, which I recognized as roughly realistic. The implications were literally existential, bearing on the nature and future of our species.

At that time I was not a critic of the explicit logic of deterrence or its legitimacy. On the contrary, I had been urgently working with my colleagues to assure a survivable U.S. capability that would threaten “clearly unacceptable damage” to the Soviet Union in response to the most successful possible Soviet nuclear attack on the U.S. But planned slaughter of 600 million civilians—ten times the total death count in World War II,⁹ That aimed-for accomplishment exposed a dizzying irrationality, even insanity, at the heart and soul of our nuclear planning and apparatus.

In reality, the scale of the potential catastrophe was and remains vastly greater than I or the JCS or any presidents imagined over the next 20 years. Not until 1982-83 did new calculations—recently confirmed—reveal the clouds of smoke and soot from the burning cities that would block out sunlight for a prolonged period, lowering temperature drastically during spring and summer, freezing lakes and rivers and destroying crops worldwide. First, fire; then ice. This “nuclear winter” would starve to death billions of humans and could extinguish humanity and most forms of complex life on earth.

Yet the “option” of massive attacks on cities (or, equivalently, upon industrial and military targets within or near cities) remains to this day among the planned alternatives, ready as ever to be carried out, within the strategic repertoire of U.S. and Russian plans and force readiness. This, a quarter-century after the discovery of the nuclear winter phenomenon.

The Americans who had built this machine, knowing that it would kill more than half a billion people if it were turned on—and who were unabashed in reporting this to the president—humans like that would not fail to pull the switch if ordered. And possibly—as I found on my visits to command posts and airfields--in some circumstances without an order.

And the presidents themselves? A few months earlier, Dwight Eisenhower had secretly endorsed the blueprints of this multi-genocide machine. He had approved this “Single Strategic Operational Plan” despite reportedly being privately appalled by its implications. He had even demanded, largely for budgetary reasons (!), that there be no other plan for fighting Russians anywhere and under any circumstances. And the Joint Chiefs had

responded so promptly to the question about the human impact of our planned attacks because they clearly presumed that John Kennedy would neither fire them nor order the machine to be dismantled. In that, it turned out, they were right.

Surely neither of these presidents actually desired ever to order the execution of these plans, nor would any likely successor want to take such an action. But they must have been aware, or should have been, of the dangers of allowing such a system to exist. Eisenhower's experience in two Quemoy crises, Kennedy's in crises in Laos, Berlin and Cuba, pointed unmistakably to possible courses of events that could lead them to launch a catastrophic pre-emptive attack. Moreover, they should have reflected on, and trembled before, the array of contingencies—accidents, false alarms, outages of communications, Soviet actions misinterpreted by lower commanders, unauthorized action—that might release pent-up forces beyond their control.

Eisenhower, I found, had chosen consciously, secretly, to accept these risks: to impose them on humanity, and all other forms of life. It was my direct knowledge that presidents Kennedy and Johnson did likewise. So did Richard Nixon. And so has every president since, including Barack Obama.

I felt sure in 1961 that the existent potential for moral and physical catastrophe was not a peculiarly American phenomenon. I was right. A few years later, after the Soviets were

humiliated by the Cuban missile crisis and Nikita Khrushchev was ousted, the Kremlin set out to imitate our destructive capacity and its dangers in every detail.

To be sure, Americans, and U.S. Air Force planners in particular, were the only people in the world who believed that they had won a war by bombing, and particularly in Japan by bombing civilians. (That disturbing story, little known to Americans, is essential to understanding what came later.)

By the end of World War II and for years afterward, there were only two air forces in the world, the British and American, that could so much as attempt to do that. But the nuclear era has put that demonic temptation—to deter or defeat an adversary by creating the capability to annihilate most of its population--eventually within the reach of a great many nations. By the spring of '61, four states (now nine) had, bought themselves that capability. Humans just like these American planners were surely at work in every nuclear weapons state producing plans for nuclear attacks on cities.

Nor did this process rely on aberrant human beings. I knew personally many of the American planners. What was frightening was precisely that I knew they were not evil, in any ordinary sense. Nor were they individually mad: in contrast to the process and system of which they were part. They were ordinary Americans, capable, conscientious and patriotic. I was sure they were not different, surely not worse, than the people in Russia who were doing the same work, or the people who would sit at the same desks in later U.S. administrations. I liked most of the planners and analysts I knew. Not only the physicists at RAND who designed

bombs and the economists who speculated on strategy (like me), but the colonels who worked on these very plans, whom I consulted with during the workday and drank beer with at night.

That chart set me on the problem of understanding my fellow human beings and how they could have knowingly continued along this path in the light of this real potential for self-destruction of our species and of most others. I have studied and worked on this problem for the past fifty years, and in the light of this research I have come to understand many elements of that potential by now. I will be discussing these in this account.

Looking at the steady failure in the two decades since the ending of the Cold War to reverse course or to eliminate this potential for extinction by nuclear war, it is hard to avoid concluding that it is dangerously likely to be realized in the long run.

Is that inevitable? Are further proliferations, the carrying out of some future nuclear threats, and the persistence of superpower nuclear arsenals that threaten global catastrophe a near-certainty? Is it too late to eliminate these dangers in time? Some dark days I think so, as I did that morning in the White House. Most of the time I don't, or I would not have tried as I have to reduce, postpone and ultimately eliminate them, and I would not be using my time to present this account of them.

I will describe a number of practical steps that we and Russia could take on relatively short notice that would eliminate the danger of nuclear winter and radically reduce the likelihood of lesser nuclear catastrophes, including nuclear terrorism.

I believe that one crucial missing element undermining efforts to mobilize a movement to bring about these changes has been the public awareness of the actual, secret US policies and practices and thus of the urgency of reducing ongoing dangers that result from them. *A Chronicle of Madness*, by means of a shocking personal narrative, aims to counter the deliberate obfuscation that has supported for more than half a century the maintenance of a wildly reckless status quo.

The basic elements of American readiness for nuclear war remain today what they were fifty years ago: thousands of nuclear weapons remain on hair-trigger alert, targeted primarily on Russian military targets, many in or near cities. The declared official rationale for such a system has always been primarily the supposed need to deter—or if necessary respond to—an aggressive nuclear attack on the U.S. This is what I was told and what I believed when I first began classified work at the RAND Corporation. That declared policy is a deliberate deception: as I discovered in reading successively higher and more secret planning documents and directives. In this memoir, I will tell the story of how I learned that:

- Contrary to the widely-believed public rationale, deterring a surprise Soviet nuclear attack—or responding to such an attack—has never been the only or even the primary purpose of these plans and preparations. The nature, scale and posture of our strategic nuclear forces has always been shaped by the requirements of quite different purposes: above all, the capacity to make credible threats of nuclear escalation or first-strike, in order to prevail in non-nuclear conflicts.

- Contrary to the cliché that “no nuclear weapons have been used since Hiroshima/Nagasaki,” American presidents have used our nuclear weapons several dozen times, mostly in secret from the public (though not from adversaries). They have used them in the precise way that a gun is used when it is pointed at someone in a confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled. To get your way without pulling the trigger is a major purpose for owning the gun. Several of these secret threats, including those in the Taiwan Straits (Quemoy) Crises, in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Nixon’s nuclear threats to Vietnam (all to be discussed), made nuclear war a near-miss, unknown to the public.

The emphatic assertion by every major candidate in the 2008 presidential campaign that “all options are on the table” with respect to Iran and which has been reiterated by President Obama in office extends this practical use of nuclear weapons to the present moment. President Obama’s recent rejection of a “no-first-use” policy in his 2010 Nuclear Posture Review continues a policy of threatening possible American initiation of nuclear war that has—outside public awareness--characterized every American administration since Truman. It is a policy protested by virtually every non-nuclear state in the world.

- Posing as it does the threat of nuclear attack by the US to every state in the world potentially in conflict with us, this U.S. persistent rejection of a no-first-use commitment has always precluded an effective non-proliferation campaign. So it does at this time under President Obama. Indeed, it has encouraged proliferation in states hoping either to counter these American threats or to imitate them. But other aspects of US nuclear policy, as well, have the same effects, effectively promoting proliferation. As I first learned in the Pentagon in 1964,

the supposed American policy opposing “all” proliferation has been not merely ineffective but secretly, at the highest levels, a surprisingly conscious hoax.

- The strategic nuclear system is more prone to false alarms, accidents, and unauthorized launches than the public (and even most high officials) has ever been aware. This was my special focus of classified investigation in 1958-61, as I will discuss. Later studies have confirmed the persistence of these risks. The chance that this system could explode “by mistake,” or by unauthorized action, taking much of the world with it, has always been a substantial risk for both superpowers. These dangers undoubtedly apply, perhaps with even higher probability, to the new nuclear states.

- With respect to deliberate, authorized U.S. strategic attacks, the system has always been designed to be triggered by a far wider range of events than the public has ever imagined. Moreover, the hand authorized to pull the trigger on U.S. nuclear forces has never been exclusively that of the president, nor even his highest military officials. As I discovered in my command and control research in the late Fifties President Eisenhower had secretly delegated authority to initiate nuclear attacks to his theater commanders under various circumstances, including outage of communications with Washington (a daily occurrence in the Pacific) or presidential incapacitation (which Eisenhower suffered twice) . And with his authorization, they had in turn delegated this initiative, under comparable crisis conditions, to subordinate commanders. To my surprise, President Kennedy continued this secret policy. So did Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Carter. So, almost certainly, has every subsequent president, to this day. This delegation has been one of our highest national secrets. An urgent reason for

enlightening the world's public on this reality of the nuclear era is that it is virtually certain that this same secret delegation exists in every nuclear state, including the new ones, North Korea, India and Pakistan. How many fingers are on Pakistani nuclear buttons? Probably not even the President of Pakistan knows.

- One occasion on which that delegation might well have been exercised was the Quemoy Crisis of 1958. I will discuss a top secret study of that crisis—including key aspects never before released—revealing that the world came closer to nuclear war in that episode than has ever been recognized.

- Thanks to revelations from the former Soviet Union, there has been growing appreciation of the extreme dangers posed by the Cuban Missile Crisis. Yet my own highly classified study in 1964—following my high-level staff participation in the crisis— unearthed never-before-revealed details that, together with the new data, demonstrate that the risks were even higher than any previous account has concluded. I will reveal for the first time how, despite the determination of both leaders to avoid nuclear war, and without either of them realizing the full dangers they were running, Cuban antiaircraft fire came literally within a hands-width of triggering the Doomsday Machines, entailing the possible end of complex life on Earth.

- These catastrophic dangers have been systematically concealed from the public. I plan to expose the workings, the surprising effectiveness and the dangers of this system of secrecy and dissimulation in more detail than has ever been done elsewhere by insiders concerned to keep their eligibility for high clearances.